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LETTER DATED 8 MARCH 1999 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ETHIOPIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to transmit to you a statement issued on 5 March 1999 by the Office of the Government Spokesperson of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the text of the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Duri MOHAMMED
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Statement issued on 5 March 1999 by the Office of the Government Spokesperson of Ethiopia

A new twist in Eritrea's campaign of lies and prevarication

The Eritrean President, in a recent letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, has stated that he accepts the Organization of African Unity (OAU) framework. That statement came as a surprise to many observers of the current conflict. People were surprised because, until the humiliating defeat of the Eritrean Army on the Badme front, the Eritrean President had vowed that he would not withdraw his forces from Badme, even if the sun ceased to rise. It is therefore very natural to ask why the sudden change of heart.

Many in the international community seem to have concluded that this sudden change came about as a result of the defeat of the Eritrean Army in Badme. It is suggested that the Eritrean President has recognized that he has lost the war and is seeking a means of cutting his losses by accepting the OAU proposals for a Framework Agreement. What this analysis suggests is that, for one reason or another, Eritrea is now ready to accept and implement the OAU package.

However, a careful reading of the statements from the Eritrean Government suggests otherwise. In an interview with German radio on 1 March 1999, Foreign Minister Wolde Tensae stated that the Eritrean Army had withdrawn from Badme as part of a new strategy whereby it would be in a "stronger protected position to launch a heavy attack" on Ethiopian forces. That same day, he told Channel Africa: "We have made some readjustments on our front line in order to inflict further losses and damage upon the attacking forces of Ethiopia."

Even more revealing of the Eritrean position is what the Government is not telling its own people. The Eritrean people have, as of today, not been told by their Government that it has accepted the OAU package. Those Eritreans who have access to the international media have obviously heard the news. But the Eritrean people as a whole have been kept in the dark on this vital issue of peace and war. Instead, the Eritrean people are being told day in and day out that their army has made a tactical withdrawal in order to regroup and launch a successful offensive. The Eritrean Government is thus telling all who care to listen that it is engaged in tactical manoeuvres in order to gain time to regroup and reorganize.

While Eritrean forces have been kicked out of Badme, they still occupy Ethiopian territory that they captured during their invasion of Ethiopia last year. They continue to occupy the Zalambessa-Aiga region, the Bada-Bure region and the Egala region. The Eritrean Government has shown no signs of withdrawing its army from those territories, as it is required to do by OAU. On the contrary, the Eritrean Army is making frantic efforts to further reinforce its trenches along these lines and mobilize additional troops to these areas.

The statements of Eritrean officials and the actions of the Eritrean Army on the ground thus prove that so far there has been no change of heart. The Eritrean Government is not trying to cut its losses after its humiliating defeat in Badme. It is simply trying to buy time to regroup and reorganize in order to retain the Ethiopian territories that it continues to occupy to this day and to regain Badme.

Just as Eritrea has been consistent in rejecting all peace proposals or trying to use them to buy time to bolster its warmaking capacity, Ethiopia has consistently pursued the peace option. When Eritrea invaded Ethiopia and occupied part of our territory, we sought the assistance of the international community to help us resolve the conflict peacefully. The international community, having established the fact that Ethiopia was forcefully occupied by Eritrea, failed to condemn the aggression. They did not call on Eritrea to withdraw from the occupied territory unconditionally. We endured foreign occupation and humiliation for nine months in the hope that the international community would convince Eritrea to accept a peaceful solution to the conflict. The international community failed to act vigorously in support of the peace package, leading to further provocation by Eritrea and the resumption of the conflict on 6 February 1999.

Ethiopia has never had and does not have any designs on the sovereignty of Eritrea. Ethiopia is simply exercising its right of self-defence. Ethiopia has never rejected peace. It was forced into war by Eritrean aggression and intransigence.